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## Flower

by [whiskey\\_in\\_tea](#)

### Summary

There's a split second when Stiles doesn't recognize him, when he's just a taller, older man with sandy hair and broad shoulders, wrinkles just at the corners of his eyes.

### Notes

Written for Leenyxxbeanie, who won me in the AO3 fundraiser auction and wanted Deucalion seducing Stiles in the bathroom of The Jungle and teaching him a healthy appreciation for dirty talk, with endgame Sterek. Obviously that 5,000 word porn prompt turned into nearly 15k of plot so... sorry I'm not sorry, I guess.

The fic is set in the spring of Stiles' junior year; I'm calling him 18 for more and less legit reasons, so technically it's not underage, but you might be careful if you find that kind of thing squicky/triggering.

Title is taken from Liz Phair's Flower, which is the best and only song about teenagers having sex.

Verity and Morgan are the best betas, still and always, and Ashe let me yell plot at her via email when I was first figuring stuff out. All y'all are the best.

# Chapter 1

Stiles' life has for years been a model of mathematical simplicity: one father, one best friend, one long-standing crush on an unattainable girl. One Jeep with no possibility of a replacement, one single bed, and one gravesite to visit on the anniversary each spring. Scott getting bitten multiplies everything, squares and cubes the world so that it fractures and replicates, so that it seems sometimes that there are two or three Stileses running around, trying to keep up. Scott is Derek's beta and Isaac's surrogate brother, and Lydia is immune and far-off, distracting herself with anyone she can lay hands on. Stiles lies to his teachers and his friends and his father, who lie in turn when they say they believe him.

He catches Danny and Ethan in the school parking lot. It's April and nice out, fucking finally, the morning's low mist burning off to reveal a high azure sky, and Stiles is skipping Calc to take a walk because he's restless. He's been restless since he was born but it's been different, recently, the feeling of his skin too tight all around him, the very air pressing in and keeping him close. Ethan's got Danny up against the side of someone's CRV, one hand bracing him at the shoulder and the other---down his pants, probably, from the way Danny's hips are working, his head thrown back against the car so that his neck is a long, bare line. Danny's bigger and taller, so Ethan has to curve over him to keep him in place, face buried against the ridge of his shoulder. They broke up in November, when Danny found out about the wolf thing---only, apparently, not.

Stiles thinks maybe he'll get away with it, that Ethan is distracted enough not to notice, but then again he smells like wolves, like pack. One minute Ethan is making muffled noises and jerking Danny off and the next he's got Stiles pinned up against a different car, one slick palm pressing against Stiles' bare forearm. Stiles has to rein in the impulse to lean down and sniff at it, curiosity still and always his besetting sin. Ethan catches the flicker of his eyes and smirks steadily down at him. "Whether you're spying or

perving," he says, low and dangerous, "I'd think twice, Stilinski."

"Just taking a *walk*," Stiles says, listening to the dull thud of his own pulse, wondering how well wolves can differentiate a startle response from actual fear, curiosity from lust from irritation, from jealousy. The Alphas' persuasion techniques are all honey, no vinegar: Ethan and Danny, Aiden and Lydia, Kali and Derek, for a little while there. He'd be insulted at not having been singled out for seduction if it wasn't so familiar: no one has ever needed Stiles to fuck his way out of anything.

"*Walk somewhere else*," Ethan grinds out, eyes flashing gold as his grip tightens. Stiles doesn't have to be told twice, but he isn't going to act like he's all that intimidated, either: Ethan isn't going to kill him in the parking lot in broad daylight, anyway. He doesn't think about it again until he's home that night, alone in bed, one hand on his dick. Just thinking how nice it would be, if for once the hand belonged to someone else.

He thinks about it a lot: what he would do, what he would want someone else to do. The world of porn is colorful and varied and useful for brainstorming but it's depressing to keep adding potential kinks to a list you haven't been able to strike blow jobs off of yet. Sometimes it surpasses the prurient and becomes almost academic: he just wants someone to lie down and let him try things, let him work it out hands-on, so to speak. He thinks about Danny and Ethan in the parking lot, about what he could have seen if he'd gotten to stick around and watch, about whether it's different when you're with a wolf. He thinks about claws and teeth, eyes flashing gold and red, getting to the very edge of someone, the visible borders of their control. Someone getting him there: taking each and every Stiles apart until his world narrows down and there's nothing left but the bare necessary facts of him, desire burned down to need. Whether it would be simpler, to know exactly what he wanted, to know how to get it. That's what he's thinking about, when he comes.

Danny corners him on his way into school the next day. "You haven't told anyone," he asks, frantic. "Right, Stiles, right?"



"Nah," Stiles says, sharpening up, trying to assess the situation. "Not yet, anyway."

"You can't," Danny says. "You can't, please, he's not supposed to---we're not---"

"No one's supposed to be fucking the Alphas, Danny, remember?" Derek's orders, though it's not like his authority carries much weight with anyone, these days.

"The Alphas don't know," Danny says. "So it's not like that, it's not like that at all." Stiles hates how hopeful he sounds, tentative and credulous. "We're--"

"Spare me," Stiles says, holding up a hand. "I'm happy to keep the secret as long as Ethan stays out of my way." Danny nods like it's a given, like Ethan will ever be tame enough to keep. "There is something you can do for me in return, though," he says, the idea bubbling up in him, a pocket of freedom he can open up for himself. "You know: a favor for a favor."

The ID is surprisingly decent: good enough for after dark, anyway, good enough for the bouncer who Danny promises will know Stiles' name. Or--- not his name, actually: Jason Walker, is what it reads next to a picture of Stiles' face, which looks thin and worn in the flash's white flare. The line spilling out of The Jungle on a Friday night is long and raucous and Stiles slips into it quietly, finding his familiar place as an interloper, observer in the chaos. Inside it's loud and hot so he strips off his overshirt, hides it in a corner, goes to the bar to get himself a drink.

Stiles knows how to do this: how to be alone in a crowd, how to get drunk efficiently. He orders two shots of bottom-shelf whiskey and tips them back shamelessly, lets his throat work, wonders if anyone will notice or care. They don't. He orders a third shot and is about to hand over the last wad of crumpled bills from his pocket when he feels someone hovering at his back.

"I've got it," the man says, sliding a single crisp twenty across the bar's slick, sticky surface. He's close enough to touch Stiles but he isn't doing anything. Stiles takes the shot before he turns around.

There's a split second when Stiles doesn't recognize him, when he's just a taller, older man with sandy hair and broad shoulders, wrinkles just at the corners of his eyes. Deucalion is wearing a thin white tee shirt and tight, worn jeans and he's exactly the kind of built that Stiles favors, forearms corded with muscle, waist tapering narrow. He's wolf-warm and so inviting, and in that second Stiles' head tilts up and his hips tilt forward, so that he's already vulnerable, when he realizes. It's just---out of context, in a loud room with flashing lights, three shots in his stomach: he didn't come here to pay any kind of attention. Deucalion's smile gets sharp at the edges; he wraps a hand around Stiles' elbow and leans in close. "Funny running into you here." He doesn't strain to be heard over the music; he speaks low and even, lets Stiles crowd in to hear. "Though I should have guessed you'd find me eventually. Not a lot to do in this city after dark."

"You," Stiles chokes out, too surprised to play it cool. "You think I was sent here?"

"It's not the worst plan your alpha's come up with."

"He's not my alpha," Stiles says automatically. He's not a wolf, for one thing, and as long as Scott isn't pack Stiles won't be either. He feels briefly bad for disavowing Derek so easily---he's not the world's worst dude, especially recently. But Stiles isn't here on wolf business, to deal with supernatural drama and listen to veiled threats. He just wants to dance with someone he's never met before, maybe let them feel him up in the bathroom. He just wants one normal night, something uncomplicated, just for himself.

"Does he know that?" Deucalion asks. He's holding Stiles' gaze, curious and intent. Stiles doesn't want to respond but it's hard not to feel it, what it means to be the sole focus of Deucalion's intention, all of his power concentrated in the minute space between them.

"He's---aware."

"So what are you doing here tonight?" Deucalion's gaze sweeps down Stiles' body, frank and appraising.

"Just blowing off steam," Stiles says. "This has nothing to do with---anyone else."

"I can respect that." Deucalion reaches past Stiles to take his change from the bartender, one forearm brushing against his shoulder so casually that Stiles really can't tell if it's intentional or not, leaning forward so that their chests almost touch. He watches his face as he pulls back, the slight flare of his nostrils, the way his pupils, blown wide by the club's dark interior, seem to widen just perceptibly as he does. "You really aren't afraid," Deucalion murmurs, fingertips coming up to press against the pulse-point at Stiles' neck.

"You're not my first werewolf," Stiles says, looking up, defiant and stubborn. Deucalion's eyes stay serious when he smiles.

"Probably not," he says. "But it's off hours for me too, you know." The fingers on Stiles' neck turn to a whole warm palm, which presses into the edge of his jawbone, thumb worrying at the hinge of his mouth. He turns helplessly into the contact, the feeling of warm skin on skin overwhelmingly, druggingly good. "Yeah," Deucalion murmurs, coming in close enough that Stiles can feel his breath against the shell of his ear. "You aren't afraid of anything anymore, are you." Stiles shakes his head. Deucalion's other arm comes around him, flat palm curving over the swell of his ass, not grabbing, just---there. Stiles feels lightheaded and unsteady, buoyant with desire: like the places where Deucalion is touching him are the only thing keeping him grounded. He turns, just slightly, and flicks his tongue out over Deucalion's fingers.

It's worth it for the sharp inhale it earns him, Deucalion's dark eyes flickering with surprise and something like amusement. "Is that what you want?" he asks, the words unfolding, lush and welcome, in Stiles' ears.

"Because if it is---I think we can figure something out."

Stiles has a moment, following him to the bathroom, where he almost turns and runs: every survival instinct he has knows this is wrong wrong wrong, the worst possible idea, to make himself vulnerable to someone bigger and stronger and older, a born predator aligned with his enemies. But he's been surrounded by enemies for so long now; he's been betrayed by everyone, by Scott, whom he would have thought he could trust with anything, always. At least with Deucalion he knows exactly where he stands.

And it is what he came for: to try it out, to see, to be Stiles unbound or better yet someone else entirely, someone who doesn't consider the consequences or make a backup plan, who doesn't think about what his dad would say, or Scott or Derek, Danny, Lydia, Ethan, Aiden, any-fucking-one. To get fucked up and stupid, to get what he wants.

They end up crowded into a tiny stall, Stiles' back pressed up against the door; Deucalion grins wryly as he palms Stiles' dick through his jeans. "Cramped quarters," he says. "But I think we can make do." Stiles had always assumed he would be noisy during sex: he's a talker, that's kind of what he does. But Deucalion keeps murmuring in his ear, voice liquid and careless and filthy, detailing everything he's doing, and there's no room for Stiles to do anything but pant and groan and push up into his hot, broad palm, not quite slick enough but tight and good just the same. "Eager," Deucalion says, eyes going heavy and hooded. "Why isn't anyone else taking care of you? You need this, and no one will touch you. Wonder why that is." He noses against Stiles' neck, bites him gently, pulling at the skin there with the rounded edges of his human teeth: just to remind them both what the stakes really are.

"Not really how we do pack bonding," Stiles manages. He looks down at his dick, disappearing over and over into Deucalion's fist, wonders if he's going to have a chance to touch him back.

"I don't do this with my pack either," Deucalion says. "But I thought we agreed we weren't going to talk about all of that." With that he pulls back to admire the effects of his efforts. Stiles is pinned up against the stall door, tee shirt rucked up, jeans pulled down, his dick sticky against his stomach.

He doesn't know if he's---debauched, desperate, if he's as flushed and frantic as he feels, but he levels his shoulders, tries to look back undaunted.

"Listen," Deucalion says, and for all the stall is tiny he feels far away, Stiles' body suddenly cool and lonely. "In a second I'm going to touch you again, make you come all over yourself, okay? And then, afterwards, you can do whatever you want." He takes Stiles in hand again, firm and certain, almost arrogant. "You can suck me off," Deucalion says. "Or you can turn around and let me fuck you. You can leave, if you want. I hope you won't, though. You feel good like his. I want to know how you feel---" Stiles cuts him off by coming hard, one hand flying up to his mouth to cover it out of sheer blind habit. He bites down almost hard enough to break the skin, orgasm wracking through him in a series of shivers and shakes, his dick pulsing and pulsing, getting both of them filthy.

"So," Deucalion breathes, and Stiles is gratified to hear that he sounds shaky, too, teetering on the knife-edge of his own tightly held control. Stiles wants to be on the other side of it, to stop fucking wondering and just know already, what it's like when everything comes apart. "What's it gonna be?"

Stiles sinks right down to his knees, gets Deucalion's dick out and admires it for a moment, thick and wet, flushed pink, tight against his belly, between the sharp lines of his hips. He's glad that he's come already, that his dick is quiet, for once, so that he can focus on this: soft skin and the taste of salt and sweat and musk on his tongue and down the back of his throat, the way having his mouth full makes the rest of him seem distant, focus narrowing him to the open channel between their bodies, where Deucalion is thrusting in and in and in. For the first time in months, it's uncomplicated: he wanted to come and he has, he wants to make someone else come, and he will. His body is simple and receptive, reduced to blind drives, fingertips clenching tightly against Deucalion's bare hip.

His mouth is hot and sore by the time Deucalion tells him to stop, a courtesy he wasn't expecting; he pulls off just a little bit, keeps working him with one hand. He looks up at Deucalion, who stares back down, pupils blown, eyes ringing red at the edges. It's the first time Stiles has seen him

look---surprised, maybe, anything other than slickly satisfied and totally in control. He wants more of that, he wants more. So he tilts his head back and bares his throat, tightening his grip and working him until he comes: thick and white and messy on Stiles' face, down the line of his neck.

It feels safe, almost, like a mask, like Stiles is starring in the porno of his own life: he's messy and anonymous and covered over, on his knees at someone else's mercy. "Get up," Deucalion says, tucks Stiles' dick back into his jeans and a scrap of paper into his pocket. "Call me when it gets late again," he says, and then he goes.

Not for nothing, has Stiles has been running with wolves for the last year: he knows how to mask scent, how to hide the traces the world leaves on him. He scrubs his face off in The Jungle's bathroom, washes his hands in scalding water, changes his clothes in the parking lot, into the spare set he keeps in the Jeeps's trunk. Under other circumstances he would just double bag the clothes and wash them later but it doesn't seem worth it, not with Deucalion's sweat and spunk all over them, so he burns the shirt, cotton catching easily from a lighter's flame. When it's really going he tosses his jeans on, too, saving Deucalion's number just at the last minute, just in case. He adds his socks to the pyre, decides the shoes are safe to keep.

He washes the clothes he wears to drive the minute he gets home, takes a long hot shower and falls into bed exhausted, his body loose in the aftermath. It's disconcerting, to have the last few hours so thoroughly gone from him, so that he smells like nothing but soap and himself, the landscape of his body basically unchanged between the sheets. All he has left is the sensation of it: Deucalion's teeth on his neck, his hands on his skin, his voice in his ear, whispering *come on, baby, you know you want to give it up*.

He keeps the paper with Deucalion's number on it, a dumb talisman to remind himself of freedom and escape, of the raw simplifying power of desire. He lets it sit on his desk for a few days, airing out, and then starts

keeping it in his pocket. He touches it during class when the world seems too dull to possibly contain anything like werewolves and hunters, and while Scott and Isaac and Boyd huddle up together during lunch, talking too low for human ears to pick up on their conversation, and when Danny's changing before lacrosse, stripping off his shirt to reveal little bruises, random enough to be anything, really, but Stiles knows, now; he *knows*. He keeps the scrap and its number in his pocket and worries at it while he pretends to think about something else. Sometimes the ink rubs off a little bit onto his fingers. The paper gets soft and worn, pliable.

On Saturday he's sitting in his room, trying to work on a physics assignment and mostly staring into space, turning the paper over and over in his hands. It's then that he first notices it, the designs on the back, the hasty shapes he's been ignoring, imagining they were just---idle sketches, maybe. (It's a funny thought: domestic Deucalion, doodling, with a phone tucked between his ear and shoulder, listening while whoever's on the other end goes on and on, making shapes on paper while he waits for Aiden and Ethan to be ready to leave, to pick up takeout, maybe, go to a movie.) There's the familiar spiral of Derek's triskelion, the Alphas' sharper version, hard angles, thin lines forming sharp spiked corners. Then there's one that Stiles doesn't recognize: a sort of funny triangle composed of three interlocking almonds, which Deucalion has sketched out several times over, sometimes with the lines thick or doubled, sometimes thin and wavery, uncertain.

Physics is done for the day: Stiles is grateful for the excuse, though it doesn't take long before he hits the limits of what the internet can give him. It's called a triquetra or trefoil knot, and it's old and Celtic, just like the triskelions, tied up in complicated overlapping pieces of history, various trinities both natural and spiritual. He calls Scott without even thinking about it, before he's come up with a decent excuse for having the paper in the first place, but it turns out it doesn't matter, really, anyway. "That's awesome, dude," Scott says, sounding enthused but disinterested down the line. "Let me know if I can help with research mode, I guess, and for sure let me know what you find!"

Which---it's not like Scott would be helpful with that part, it's true, not like

it would be fun or useful, even, to have him as company at the library while Stiles works. It's just--- their worlds keep on drifting away from one another, Scott all action while Stiles reads and writes and makes phone calls, traces symbols and draws designs in mountain ash, his work ephemeral and uncertain. He spends another half hour dicking around on the internet before he gives in to the inevitable and calls Derek.

Most of what Deaton's taught him in the last year is that there isn't much to learn: each pack has its own histories, its own traditions and lore. There are no libraries and no Idiot's Guides, just centuries of magic tuned to its users, highly personalized and difficult to explain, let alone teach, let alone successfully replicate. Apparently the Alphas were born of a splinter from the Hale pack, the youngest son of some long-lost generation who figured out how to create Alphas out of thin air, giving power to the rank and file: their triskelion's running legs show progress where the Hale's curved version represents eternity. Their mandate has always been to take down traditionally structured packs; Kate got to the Hales before they could, and they've been trying to claim its scion ever since.

The triquetra's too closely linked to them, the matching triskelions, to be a coincidence. Which is to say that shit like this goes directly to Derek or it goes nowhere at all. Peter helped him round up what was left of the Hale legacy, before his magically renewed lease on life ran out again; it's not much, but it's got to be more than Stiles can suss out from whats-your-sign.com.

He texts Derek: might have a lead on something Alpha-related, can we talk, and is unsurprised when he gets back come over not five minutes later. It's the classic Derek text: terse, commanding, confusing. Still, it's better than physics homework, so he gets in the Jeep and heads over to the loft, working up a cover story on the way. "I ran into Deucalion downtown," he says by way of a greeting, trying to hew as close to the truth as possible while eliding the actual facts of the matter. "He gave me his phone number-- said I might be able to---help out, with some things. For his pack."



"Your magic?" Derek asks gruffly, reaching out to take the paper. Stiles finds himself reluctant to let it go: the only evidence of his little tryst, his one well-kept secret.

"I think so," Stiles says, forcing his fingers to loosen their grip. Derek frowns seriously at the numbers on the front. "That's not, uh, the interesting part, though," Stiles goes on. "There are---drawings, on the back of the paper. I'm not sure if they mean anything but there's your triskelion and their triskelion and then this other thing which, I looked it up, it's the same sort of general---idea and I thought---anyway, I thought you'd want to see it."

"Yeah," Derek says, still not looking at Stiles. His expression has morphed from irritated to---curious, maybe, like he's figuring something out.

Stiles has never hated Derek, certainly not in the personal, vindictive way Scott does: they get along well enough, can work together when they have to. He thinks under other circumstances they might have been---not friends, probably, but something closer to allies. He might have felt comfortable, here in Derek's apartment, comfortable enough to wander over and browse his bookshelves, to get himself a glass of water without asking, first, without having to have someone show him where the glasses are kept.

"This is really interesting," Derek says, taking a seat at the long wooden table that does double duty as a desk.

"It's called a triquetra," Stiles explains, in case Derek doesn't know. "I looked up some stuff about its significance, but I couldn't make any kind of useful connection on an, um, a wolf-level."

"I've never seen it before," Derek says. "But my guess is that you're right, that it's important. Especially given how many times he's drawn it over. I'll look at some things, see what I can find." It sounds like a dismissal. Stiles starts to ready himself to go. He reaches to take the paper back without thinking about it. Derek cocks his head to one side.

"Are you thinking about it?" he asks, soft. "About calling him back?"

Stiles is frozen in place, guilt burning through him, white-hot and terrifying. "No," he says, too forceful. "No, no, no."

"I would understand," Derek goes on, implacable, something steely in his eyes and the set of his jaw. "Deucalion can be---convincing."

Stiles thinks about his hands, his mouth, his whispered words: how easy it was, to fall in line and just let someone else, for a little while. "I wouldn't do that to Scott," he says, then, resolute: that's one of the most basic truths, something he can rely on no matter what, no matter how fucked things get between them. Deucalion hasn't shown all of his cards yet but he's still almost certainly the enemy. Stiles isn't going to call him ever, ever again.

"Might not be the worst thing in the world if you did," Derek goes on. "You might learn something useful, one way or another."

"You'd trust me with that?" Stiles says, incredulous. "As some kind of---double agent, Derek, seriously?"

"You don't have to," Derek says, hurried. "I really didn't---you don't---you just seemed like maybe you wanted to. To find a way to. Without it being a betrayal."

Stiles does, of course he wants it both ways: Derek doesn't know what he's talking about, but it doesn't mean he's wrong. "I'll tell you if I learn anything," Stiles says.

He programs Deucalion's number into his phone. He makes the first call that night.

## Chapter 2

So Stiles' life settles into a pattern, a set of days that happen in triplicate: mornings and afternoons he's a dutiful son and indifferent student. After school he plays lacrosse or tags along with Isaac and Scott. In the evenings he's with Deucalion or Derek, getting an education of one kind another. He feels more than usually slim and warm and fragile, always alone in rooms with wolves.

Deucalion is---gentle with him, actually: he doesn't ask for more than Stiles wants to give, though it turns out there isn't much he doesn't like. They ease into it, figure each other out. Deucalion wasn't kidding about the off hours; they meet up in the house the Alphas share, usually, but the others give him a wide berth, and they never talk business in bed.

Instead they start from the beginning. The whole first week Deucalion just spreads Stiles out and makes him touch himself, tells him exactly how to do it. "So I'll know what you look like on the nights you don't come over," he says, staring down at Stiles, ignoring the bulge obvious in the front of his own jeans, patient and serene. "So I'll know exactly how badly you want me to fuck you. So that every time you touch yourself you'll think of me. Of this."

Stiles doesn't like following orders but he does, of course he does: every time he starts to jerk off he hears Deucalion saying slower, come on, tease yourself a little bit, show me how long you can hold on. Put your fingers in your mouth---fuck, yeah, just like that. Spread your legs. Don't touch yourself there---not yet, not yet. His voice is low and thick and full, the only generous part of him. And it turns out that Stiles likes having an audience; he likes warm skin against his and the way sex smells, a rich, particular musk that hangs around his fingers, perceptible even to dull human senses. He learns a lot about what makes him come, that week, what makes him swear and shake and plead. When Deucalion finally gives in and fucks him, Stiles cries just a little bit, because it feels so fucking good. Deucalion calls

him a cockslut and licks him clean, after, lets Stiles shower in his bathroom. He kisses him solemnly on the forehead before he leaves.

Stiles gets his payback. He learns to jerk off right before he comes over, so that he smells like sweat and jizz and there's nothing Deucalion can do about it. He almost likes those nights best, when he can just leave his own body behind and focus on someone else's, on learning how to suck cock just the way Deucalion likes it, on getting him so worked up that stutters and stumbles, fingernails forming sharp points that he digs into the mattress. Stiles is eighteen; usually he can get it up before the end of the night, his second orgasm wrenched out of him with force. He hasn't slept this well in a long, long time.

"Why don't you," he asks, once, when Deucalion is trying to work him through one of his harder-fought second boners. Stiles is riding three of Deucalion's fingers, sitting in his lap; he can feel his own arousal like a pleasant, distant fog, his body's exhausted fullness hugely, lullingly good. "With your pack. You said you didn't, that time. Seems like it's a shame. So many pretty boys." Danny is never around the house; Stiles gets the impression that the Alphas actually don't know about him. But he catches them together every now and again---they're not as discreet as they think they are, at school---and what used to be fascinating is now tantalizing. He doesn't like Ethan, particularly, but he's always been curious about fucking him, getting taken apart by someone who looks like a Central Casting high school meathead jock.

He isn't really expecting an answer; Deucalion talks a lot while they're fucking, but he manages not to say much, as a rule. Tonight, apparently, is the exception. His fingers stiffen and twist, and what was lazy, pleasant fingering becomes pointed, Stiles' dick going from three-quarter mast to just this side of painful in four sharp thrusts. "They're no fun," Deucalion says. "They already belong to me, they fall in line too easily. You're---" His fingers stop moving. Stiles jerks against the loss of sensation, his body rocking helplessly. Deucalion leans him back against the tangle of sheets, suckles at the base of Stiles' cock, licking it delicately, fingers curling and the sensation is gorgeous but not enough, not enough. "You make me work

for it," Deucalion says, and then he goes even slower, strings Stiles along so beautifully that by the end of it he's wrecked, sweat-drenched, come-covered, his body a messy map of debauchery, of everything he's asked for and gotten.

Deucalion swipes one finger across Stiles' slit, cleaning up the last of what's left there. He licks his finger, levels Stiles with an even look. Stiles returns it, heavy-lidded with exhaustion, thinking: *okay, okay*.

So they keep on. Deucalion only ever leaves marks that can be covered up, even in a locker room: his neck remains bare and white while his hips and ass and inner thighs are littered with bruises, bite marks, the thin vulnerable skin always aching with the signs of his claim. He tells Scott about his deal with Derek, that he's working a little bit with Deucalion, mostly so he can quit being so careful about his scent; he tells his dad that he's working on a semester-long physics project with Danny, so he has an excuse for not being around quite so much anymore. They aren't great lies but he gets away with them. Nothing really changes, because nothing ever does.

The only snag, oddly enough, is Lydia, who Stiles recruited to tutor him in Calc when it became clear that gathering intelligence on werewolves was going to conflict with much-needed study time. It made more sense in the fall, when they were working together, when sometimes it was actual tutoring and sometimes it was a good excuse to be over at her house talking about other stuff. Now things are quiet and Lydia is fucking Aiden and they still sit down at the Starbucks downtown once a week to discuss about derivatives and integrals. He has a hundred other places to be but there's no way to break the date without lying to her about it, and there's no sense in rousing her suspicions, not when they're always on half-alert anyway, after everything they did to her last year.

Stiles is more distracted than usual, which is saying something; he longs for the days when the mere physical presence of Lydia Martin would have been the only promise he needed to get his mind and body to fall in line, fully focused on her. Now, though, he's thinking about Danny and Ethan, about

Deucalion, about how much Lydia knows and what she suspects, what she might suspect, given enough time and the right data. They get through the next few days' worth of homework before she gives up entirely, leaving Stiles to his own thoughtful devices while she texts and sips at her soy chai latte.

"Making a date for later?" Stiles asks.

"None of your business," she responds primly.

"Derek said---"

"Fuck Derek," Lydia tells him, with her coolest, evilest eye. Stiles wonders if Aiden knows that he's at least in part a revenge plot, Lydia spitting on Derek for everything Peter put her through.

"Yeah okay," Stiles says, because he's not about to try to convince her that working with Peter was anything but a selfish move on Derek's part. "But do you really---you know what you're doing, right, Lyd?"

"I always do."

She does, of course she does, she's Lydia Martin: her backup plans have backup plans, these days. Stiles will never forgive himself for wanting her to be a damsel in distress, someone he could save---for wanting it so badly that he deprived her of the information she would have needed in order to save herself. Lydia's nothing without information, but with it she's a deadly weapon. He wonders if there's any way to bring her in on the triquetra without making her work with Derek directly.

"I've actually---" he says, and then stops, because he doesn't think Lydia's drunk the Alpha Kool-Aid but there's no way of knowing her loyalties, not really, and he can't give this away, not when it's the only real lead they've had in months. "I feel good about where we're at," he finishes lamely instead. "I'll leave you to your evening plans, yeah?"

"Mmmm," Lydia says, eyes on her phone, nodding absently to Stiles as he

leaves.

At first there isn't anything for him to tell Derek; not much to see, when you're facedown in the sheets, being bent over couches and kitchen tables, any available surface. It's around the time they actually start fucking that Deucalion and the rest of the pack start to get comfortable with him, his presence around the house. He stays sometimes, for a little while, after. Stiles starts hanging out there occasionally, doing homework at the enormous kitchen table: it's quiet but not silent, not the way his house is with no one else home. Ethan and Aiden swing in and out, make themselves cheese sandwiches and frozen pizzas, sometimes offering him a bite; Kali turns out to know a certain amount about US politics and government. Some days it's easy to forget that they're all monsters, that they've got ulterior motives, that Stiles has a pack and this isn't it.

The only thing that keeps him anchored in his actual life are the nights he spends with Derek, the two of them rattling around in the enormous blank space of the loft. The silences around Derek are different from the ones Stiles is used to: it's like listening to the ocean roar through a seashell, the sound of something huge and powerful heard in miniature, disconnected from its physical source. He feels faraway even when they're almost touching, shoulders brushing as they bend their heads over a book. Stiles has come to know the details of Deucalion's life, the milk running low in the fridge and the windows always open because everyone in the house runs hot; Derek's remains largely opaque. Stiles wonders how much longer Derek will be able to bear it, being this alone.

His one human habit is tea, loose leaf herbal, mostly, which Derek brews in an ancient navy teakettle and serves in mismatched mugs from the Dollar Store. They sit and sip and work and it makes the evenings seem companionable, lends them a thin veneer of closeness that allows them to find a way to function together. Stiles is quick where Derek is stubborn and methodical. It takes them a while to develop a system: Derek reads and annotates, lets Stiles work through his theories, a hundred or two hundred

coming and going in the space of an evening. The triquetra dates as far back as the Celts but, like everything else, got repurposed by the Christians and now Wiccans and Neopagans. It represents a handful of different trinities, among them the phases of the moon. It's almost certainly the key to something---once Stiles knows what to look for he sees it everywhere, scribbled and scrawled on half of the Alphas' possessions---but it seems like Deucalion doesn't know what to do with it any better than they do.

"Maybe it's a sign that you should just have a threesome with them," he says at one point, tired and frustrated, scrubbing his eyes with the heels of his hands.

"What---" Derek says, startled.

"I was kidding, Jesus, obviously. I just---I feel like we've been through mother, father, child and girl, woman, crone and waxing, waning, gibbous and---I'm sick to death of researching things that come in threes. Maybe they've been seducing the pack one by one because they're trying to lure you into a giant orgy."

"Supposing they were," Derek says. He seems to be following the thread of the joke very cautiously, like he isn't quite sure if Stiles is kidding. "Maybe they just wanted---"

"Your babies, probably," Stiles says, still flip. "You're an extremely attractive bunch, and I'm sure pure wolf genetics get a little---close for comfort, after a couple of generations."

"If it was just sex they would have gotten what they came for already," Derek says, face darkening again, and Stiles feels bad, all of a sudden: he'd forgotten for a minute about Derek and Kali. He isn't entirely sure he knew that they really had, that Derek really minded. He's always assumed that all wolves are like Deucalion, when it comes to fucking: practical, ruthless, cheerfully obscene.

"Maybe it's a dark ritual to get the dudes pregnant," he mutters under his breath.



"Okay, that's it," Derek announced with finality. "You're done with the internet. Forever. That is not a thing, oh my god, that is not a thing we can do!" Stiles wants to say he knows, that if Deucalion had a knot he would have taken it already, that Ethan doesn't seem to be on any kind of birth control, but he bites it back, all of his specific knowledge of werewolf dicks.

"You sure?" he asks instead. "I've seen some very convincing---"

"*Stiles*," Derek says, pained, but that night marks a turning point in their relationship, after which Stiles makes jokes and Derek kind of laughs at them. Eventually Derek starts making jokes, tentative, terrible jokes, about the triquetra as a failed ancient handcuff design, as Deucalion toying with designs for a pack tramp stamp. Stiles makes comic book references and Derek doesn't get them and Derek talks a lot about mythology, which is apparently kind of his specialty. They find open space, common ground: a place to be, when they're together.

It's interesting, spending time with the Alphas, with Deucalion, who is at least nominally in charge of them. Stiles had always imagined that every other pack ran like a well-oiled machine, that it was just Derek's basic incompetence that kept his wolves from making a go of it, but the Alphas are a mess of seething tensions, when he gets close enough to really see. The twins are teenagers just like the rest of them: there's Ethan's secret thing with Danny and Aiden's very public dalliance with Lydia, the creeping signs that they're happy to stretch out in Beacon Hills' power vacuum, alphas in the high school hallways as much as they are anywhere else. The problem is that they're so often in conflict with Kali and Ennis, who are your basic brutality squad, primed for violence.

They're starting to chafe after so long in the planning stages, sulking around the house and pouting, ripping into each other in the backyard with a ferocity that startles him, even still. Deucalion catches him watching them, once, looking down from the window in his second story bedroom; that's the first time he rims Stiles, licks him open until Stiles forgets his own

name, until the red slashes of blood he'd seen on Kali's claw-ripped face blend with the red behind his eyelids and he can just---let it go. After that, though, he starts watching more carefully, wondering what Deucalion is hiding, what he doesn't want seen.

He starts coming over a little earlier, hanging around a little longer, and he catches glimpses: Deucalion trying to keep everyone from coming apart at the seams. He can only imagine how exhausting it is, a pack's natural hierarchy absent and all of that power to contend with. It requires a certain amount of wheedling and almost as much raw force. Stiles starts to see why Deucalion likes him, what it is that he's for: when he comes he comes willingly, patient and unafraid.

Stiles, for one, appreciates the attenuated pace of things, the games of logic and strategy in which he's actually something of a player. In the fall it was all wolfsbane and moonlit confrontations in the deep woods, news they called or texted him about, Derek locking him in his own damn bedroom to keep him safe. It was just as terrifying, not to be there, to wonder if he was the only one left, if the Alphas were coming for him next. The advantage of playing both sides is that he knows where he stands, most days. If things stay in place long enough he might even get to be the one who makes the final shift.

From what Stiles can gather, Deucalion is in much the same place as they are: he wants Derek in his pack and Derek wants the pack off of his land. He spent the fall trying to break up Derek's pack, make it seem like the best part of wisdom to turn tail and abandon Beacon Hills; now he's moved on to persuasion and, barring that, force. The moon was three quarters full, on that first night at The Jungle, and it's been thinning down every night since. Stiles feel lulled by the wane, the shortening nights, the wolves pulled further and further into their human instincts.

It's Derek who has the breakthrough, actually, on a night when Stiles is trying to study for a math test, being of no help but around just to keep him company. It's AP Calc AB---it' always fucking calc, these days, figuring out

the volumes of figures, rotating lines in space, which Stiles is surprisingly crap at: he's forever turning curves in the wrong direction over the wrong axis, coming up with fanciful shapes and impossible equations. He gets so frustrated that Derek abandons his work and starts trying to help him, drawing graphs in the air with his hands.

There was a time when Stiles would have found it unbearable: Derek leaning in close, intent and serious, his fingers shaping space, elegant and easy. Derek in general, actually, casual and almost relaxed, wearing a soft old sweatshirt, the sharp lines of his features eased by the soft scruff of his stubble. When he showed up in town he looked---like a porn star or a model or something, anything other than a person, someone you could figure out how to touch for real. Now, though, he's beautiful but recognizable, his face familiar, known. It was easy not to want him when he was just danger and irritation, when he would show up and scowl and sass, slink away into the shadows. Now Stiles reminds himself that he's been having filthy, depraved sex with a much older man, and there's no good reason to fall apart over Derek Hale talking about calculus. It doesn't help nearly as much as it should.

So he isn't really paying enough attention, can't understand it, when Derek's focus snaps away from him. "Shit," he says, "shit, Stiles," and Stiles' mind goes, helplessly, to Deucalion saying the same thing, the first time he came home and found Stiles in his bed, thrusting his hips against three slicked-up fingers. He ducks his head to hide the flush, panic making his heartbeat pick up even faster; he's so focused on getting his breath to slow that he almost misses it, Derek starting to work it out. "It's a knot," he says. "I don't remember---but it's a knot, a binding, the triqueta, it's the simplest knot, it has to be."

Which, of course it is: Stiles spent five minutes on that corner of Wikipedia before dismissing it out of hand. It was magic he was looking for, not math, and he doesn't quite get until Derek says the word binding. A way to keep everyone in their place. To tie Derek to the pack, maybe, to tie the Alphas to the land---it's an avenue, anyway, it's something they haven't explored to death. (It's an excellent excuse to close his book and forget about the test,

for a little while.)

They spend the rest of the evening doing exactly what Deucalion was doing, on that scrap of paper, all over his house: drawing it over and over again, trying to figure out how to activate it. They still don't know what it does, exactly, but it's so thrilling to be making progress that Stiles doesn't care. He pours spark into it, believes with all of his heart that this is going to work, that he's going to find an easy way out of fucking Deucalion and falling for Derek, a knot that will tie it all up for him, easy and neat. The shapes on paper stay there, graphite and ink flat and inert.

"Maybe we need special ink," Derek says at last.

"Maybe we need a special practitioner," Stiles shoots back; he's tired and frustrated with himself, empty and drained.

"I thought---" Derek says, frowning, brow creasing. "I thought you were--- kind of. I thought Deucalion was teaching you something. Some stuff."

Stiles' pulse thunders and thuds. He gets caught up in it, his own heartbeat, the panic of knowing that Derek can hear it, that he's wasting time he should be using, making up a lie. "It, uh, hasn't been that useful," he says. "You know, magic is---specific. And I'm human. So."

"You've been over there a lot though," Derek goes on, halting.

"Yeah," Stiles says, trying desperately to sound casual. "You know. He likes keeping me around, keeping an eye on me. And I'm learning other stuff. For this," he amends hastily. "For us. For the pack." The rest of the words assemble in the back of his throat, whole sentences forming unbidden: I started doing this for myself and now there's his pack and your pack and I don't know what I'm doing, really, I thought my life was making me complicated but it might just be---me, that's a mess, who doesn't know what he wants. Stiles bites down on his lip, beating back the sudden confessional urge. This isn't the time.

Derek's face softens; Stiles' first thought is that he's gotten away with it

again, and he wants to punch himself for being so callous, so deeply, unbelievably selfish. "You know you don't have to," Derek says, and there's something in his voice that makes Stiles shiver, something iron hard and completely certain. "You don't have to do anything you don't want to do."

But Stiles does want it: that's the problem. He doesn't love Deucalion---some days he doesn't even like him---but he loves the warm weight of his body, the way he holds Stiles in place and whispers in his ear, unafraid to ask for what he wants and take what Stiles will give. Stiles can be dark and needy, desperate, open. Their agreement has been meant to take them away from their complicated, mundane lives; Stiles comes to value the person he gets to be, in between. That doesn't change anything about who he is most hours of the day. He plots to help Derek kick Deucalion out of Beacon Hills even as he mourns what that absence will mean, how lonely he'll be when he's gone.

Because the thing is that it isn't hard to keep Deucalion with him, his filthy murmur a constant litany in Stiles' day. No one's ever---told him, talked to him, no one's ever been that plain with him before, about his appeal. "You could come with us," Deucalion tells him, once, after. They're both completely fucked out, sprawled senseless, boneless over the sheets. "I think we could find a use for you. Might even help me convince Derek to come along." They never talk about it, what Deucalion is doing in Beacon Hills, where Stiles' loyalties lie: the rule has always been that it's off hours when they're together, pack business off the table entirely. Hearing Derek's name with Deucalion's spunk still drying on his stomach makes Stiles wince, just slightly. Deucalion has no right to Derek. But then, Stiles reminds himself, neither does he.

"I'd think about it," he says, stretching expansively, concentrating on the spread of his body, making sure Deucalion is watching. "'M supposed to be leaving for college next year anyway, so, you know. Maybe."

It doesn't occur to him until later that it's the first time he's ever had to lie to Deucalion. It occurs to him at the same time that he didn't even particularly

mind.

Now that he knows there's math involved after all Stiles decides to take it to Lydia; it's not like he can focus on Calc for shit, these days, and he's brought his average up to a solid B+ which he's learning to accept may never become the A- he would have been able to manage with a slightly more ordinary life. The problem, he remembers now, is not just that they didn't tell her anything but that they lied to her---that she might take lies-by-omission as exactly the same kind of betrayal, if she ever finds out what Derek and Stiles have been up to, if they ever manage to kick her boyfriend out of Beacon Hills for good.

"I was thinking we could do something different today," he says when they're settled. "Talk about, um, knots."

"Knots," Lydia says skeptically. "I'm not sure you're ready for knots, Stilinski. You have enough trouble with the simpler shapes. Maybe---"

"This isn't, uh, strictly a calc thing," Stiles says, shifty-eyed, suddenly realizing that a very public Starbucks is perhaps not the best venue for this particular conversation. Too late now, though. "Derek and I have been---"

"What part of fuck Derek did I not make clear to you?" she asks. Stiles is pretty sure that the lip of foam sloshing just at the edge of her overfull cup is the only reason she isn't flouncing right out the door.

"Hey, listen, I'm not his biggest fan either," Stiles says, thinking liar, liar, pants on fire, grateful as always to be in company that can't tell for sure. "But they fucked with Scott and---Danny, remember, that weird thing with Ethan at the beginning of the year?"

"I don't know if you've forgotten that I've been fucking one of them for the last little while," Lydia says, way too sweet. So have I, Stiles wants to tell her. That doesn't mean anything, not really. He takes a deep breath and sorts out a plausible lie.

"I don't know if Aiden's mentioned, then," he says. "That I've been. Around."

"No," Lydia says, a serious glower forming on her china doll face.

"Deucalion's been---tutoring me, on some magic stuff. And I've been working with Derek. And it's been---complicated."

"Jesus, Stiles," Lydia says, sinking back in her chair, too impressed to put up a front. "That's---are you sure you know what you're doing?"

"Not at all," he says, wryly, thinking of her answering the same question, unruffled and certain. "But you always do, so."

"The Aiden thing isn't---that's just to piss Derek off, mostly," she says, shrugging. "I'm not---I mean, my loyalty is to Allison, and you know she wants nothing to do with this nonsense, so I figure who cares, if I get some on the side. But what you're doing is---Derek knows, right?" Stiles nods. "And the knot is part of what you've been working on?"

"Yeah," Stiles says. "Deucalion asked, and Derek said I should, that I might--- learn something, at least about magic, maybe about this knot. So it's---I know what side I'm on. But we're stuck on this. And I thought maybe you could help." So he explains it all to her, starting from the beginning: the Alphas and the Hales, the matching triskelions, the triquetra, which she recognizes immediately as a trefoil. She can provide a lot of specifics and applications but nothing that explains its mythic significance. Still, Stiles feels weight lifting incrementally off his shoulders. It feels---so good, to have a couple fewer secrets, one more person who heard a half-version of the truth and didn't run screaming, who actually agreed to help.

They spend an hour and a half on it; Lydia immerses herself in the problem fully, stares down at it bright eyed, making little notes and chewing indelicately on a fingernail. Stiles forces himself not to think about how pretty she is, when she's animated, to focus on how lucky he is that she's helping him instead. It's only the buzz of a text on her phone that distracts her, pulls her back into the real world.

"Aiden?" Stiles asks, already sure of the answer.

"Yeah."

"Okay, well, thank you. This was, um, super helpful. And if you think of anything---"

"I'll let you know." Lydia pauses for a moment, twisting her hands together in her lap. "Stiles," she says. "When I started---with Aiden. It was just supposed to be once."

"You don't have to explain yourself to me," Stiles says, thinking of pulling Deucalion's number out of his pocket before he committed his jeans to the flames, of how desperately he clung to it and how convinced he was that he wouldn't use it, that it was just a talisman, nothing more. He's pretty sure he wouldn't have, either, without Derek's permission, without a better reason to do it. Self-control isn't precisely the same thing as self-denial; he's always had issues with the former, but the latter, it turns out, he's got in spades.

"And then I thought, it's just sex, you know, so whatever. I've done that before. I can do that," Lydia goes on, like he hasn't spoken. "But it's---impossible, not to get to know someone, even a little bit. To see how they're---kind of human, in funny ways. So I won't tell him about this, because I know how I want this to end."

"Thank you," Stiles says again. Lydia looks up, looks at him, frank and direct.

"But it's understandable," she says at last. "If you---Deucalion's not a monster, either. I know you know what you're doing, mostly, but I would understand. If sometimes you got confused. If you felt like shit, either way." She leaves, after that, leaves Stiles with a cold cup of decaf and three pages of illegible scrawl and his head buzzing and brimming, trying to sort it out. It's true that he's come to know Deucalion and his pack too well for it to be easy, that the betrayal is going to cost him something.

But not doing it would cost him more: it might cost him Derek, silent,



infuriating Derek, the tentative friendship they've forged together, the only solid thing Stiles has built for himself since Scott got bitten this time, last year. Back then they worried a lot about preserving Scott's humanity, like he would one day go feral and run off into the woods forever. It never occurred to him that Derek was born wolf, that he was still and always resolutely human, even when he had no reason to be.

Because that's what he's learned, really, the last few weeks: how much of Derek is human, motivated by guilt and suffering and love, the most normal human emotions. He knows what Derek looks like when he's sleepy, when he's wired, when he's deeply engaged in a conversation he cares about. He knows what Derek wears around the house, what he makes for himself when he doesn't think he'll have company, that he's capable of surprising Stiles, of being surprised by him. There's an easy intimacy between them that Stiles wants to clutch tightly, maybe too tightly, something he wants to get his hands into, fill his cupped palms with. Derek's life is full of empty spaces but still he's found a way to make room for Stiles, a specific place where he knows he fits. He's spent so much time trying to figure himself out, his size and shape, what he's doing he's doing, what he's meant for. With Derek it doesn't feel like a question, ever. He's just Stiles. That's as much as Derek needs.

But Derek has been kind of--- absent, since Stiles slipped up, since he admitted how little he'd been learning about magical under Deucalion's tutelage. And then when Stiles leaves Deucalion's one night he has a text from him that just says come over if you can. He showered at the Alpha's house, which might be more suspicious than not, but he goes anyway: maybe Derek has figured something out, maybe the whole mess is about to be done. "Sorry if I smell like Alpha," he says as soon as Derek opens the door. "I came straight over."

"Mmm," Derek says, and plucks a single, sandy hair from the sleeve of Stiles' shirt. "I was hoping you would." His smile is guarded. He doesn't invite Stiles in.

## Chapter 3

For three days nothing happens. Stiles avoids Deucalion and doesn't hear from Derek. He spends a lot of time with Scott and Isaac and Boyd, gets marginally back into their good graces. He goes two whole days without jerking off and then spends an hour doing it on the third, taking himself apart so thoroughly that afterwards he actually has to take a nap. It's not a great coping mechanism, to need to be fucked into oblivion to sleep properly, but apparently it's one that he's developed. He wonders if he could convince Derek that Deucalion's dick is actually medicinal, something he needs to function properly. Probably not, he decides.

By the fourth day he's going out of his damn mind, the world a slow, torturous spin cycle of Deucalion's voice and Derek's fingers and Derek's closed eyes, sad smile. He sleeps fitfully and dreams about triangles and circles, knots closing in on his wrists and ankles, Deucalion fucking him, morphing into Derek, Derek burying his face in his neck and biting down, sharp. He gives in and texts Deucalion. *Come over after seven*, he gets back. *No moon tonight*. Hope you're ready. Stiles draws the line at Deucalion wolfing out while they're fucking---there's a hard-on for danger and then there's just stupid, and Stiles is a lot of things but he's not actively dumb. It took him a long time to figure out that that was why Deucalion was so carefully controlled, at first. As they've gotten closer and closer to full dark he's been wilder, rougher, pushing Stiles just a little bit farther every time. He's already aching to think of it: what it's going to be like, tonight.

But he never gets a chance to find out. Stiles comes over at 8:30, slipping out after dinner, to find Deucalion finishing up the dishes, laughing with Aiden in the kitchen. "I'm gonna---upstairs," he says, Deucalion nodding, unconcerned. He goes up and pokes around the room for a cursory minute--

-nothing he hasn't seen before, nothing unusual or helpful, because all of that shit is locked in the study, of-fucking-course. He strips off his shirt, examines himself in the full-length mirror: yep, still pale and broad and slim, mole-dotted, lanky and human all over. He kicks off his shoes, too, and curls himself up in the sheets. He can't tell whether Deucalion washes them after he leaves, whether he likes Stiles' scent on his things or just tolerates it, but he knows that Deucalion likes it when he smells like him.

There's some kind of commotion downstairs, which Stiles is fully prepared to ignore---the twins are always roughhousing with Ennis, sparring with Kali, throwing heavy objects at each others' heads just for spite---but it sounds intense and sustained, and eventually he gets curious, cracks the door and listens. "Stop," Deucalion is saying. "Okay, Derek, just---tell us what the fuck is going on." Derek. Stiles is down the stairs before he can even think about it, what it means, what Derek will think when he sees.

All of the Alphas are in the living room in shredded shirts, healing up scratches and cuts. They're gathered together in a group, blinking at Derek and at each other, more baffled than frightened. Every single one of them is human.

Derek's got one hand in his pocket, breathing harsh. He's beta shifted; he pauses to pull back the fangs so he can talk. "You aren't going to be able to shift here," he says. "Stop trying. You'll just wear yourself out."

"How---" Ethan says, as Aiden's cursing, trying to leap forward, Deucalion reaching out on arm to hold him back.

"Doesn't matter how," Derek says, very calm. "You'll be fine once you get off my land, but as long as you're on Hale territory you'll be confined to human form. I'm not coming with you and neither are my betas, so I suggest you pack your things."

"Sure," Deucalion says, too casual, taking one small step forward. "Of course, Derek, if we'd known we weren't wanted we'd have left ages ago. I wouldn't be so quick to speak for your betas, though. Some of them seem to have formed---attachments."

"Stiles, you promised," Ethan says, and Derek's head snaps around to Stiles, who's standing barefoot and shirtless, real fear coming over him in waves as every eye in the room turns towards him.

"I was talking about Stiles, actually," Deucalion says, in the same silky voice he used on Stiles that first night, cheerful and casual and certain.

"Although if you've managed to get claws into one of Derek's packmates, Ethan, now would definitely be the time to share with the group." Stiles' gaze is locked on Derek's. It's awful: Derek's posture is still straight and defiant but he's gone from triumphant to humiliated and hurt, his eyes dark and haunted as his mouth stiffens and flattens and firms.

"Stiles can do whatever he wants," Derek says. "He's not a wolf and he's not pack."

Stiles' life has been fractured and distorted, these last few weeks, his multiple selves more multiple than ever, pulling him in a hundred directions at once. Derek's words slice through the layers, make a very clean cut. Not wolf. Not pack. Stiles feels himself distinctly, in his small and trembling skin: the lone bare fact of his body cut off from contact, from community. Not pack, he thinks. "Told you your alpha didn't know anything," Deucalion says, smirking. "He says you aren't pack. But remember my offer: you could be." His voice is as sweet as ever, temptingly rich and full of easy promise. Stiles feels it like something physical, one little tender touch, at their parting.

He's already made his decision.

Stiles goes home, after, sits in his driveway in the Jeep for five minutes, trying to sort it out. It's only barely 9:30 and he has hours until curfew, until his father will begin to worry about where he is. "Fuck it," he mumbles, turning the key in the ignition. The drive to Derek's is habitual, now. He tunes out his brain's chatter and drums his fingers against the steering wheel, hums along to a song on the radio.

Derek is there when he gets there, of course, still fully dressed. Probably he's been sitting at his kitchen table all by himself, as usual, staring into space and neatly organizing his feelings so that he can put them away. "Let me in," Stiles says, a little surprised when Derek does. There's a single mug of tea on the table, more brewed in the kitchen; Stiles pours himself some before he comes back to sit down, determined to keep them on familiar, level ground.

Derek doesn't seem inclined to start the conversation; he just sits and stares, determinedly blank. Stiles feels like a bell, struck once an hour ago and still vibrating hollowly, buzzing in his skin. "You didn't tell me," he starts. "That you'd figured it out. That you were going to---do that."

"Are you angry because I interrupted your fucking---your tryst?" Derek's fury is cold and contained.

"No," Stiles says, and it's only a sliver of a lie. He would have liked an hour or two in bed with Deucalion. He would have liked to have known which time would be the last time. He always knew it was untenable, that there was no way to keep it. He was actively working to make sure he couldn't. He just wishes he'd had more warning, more control, that the last three weeks hadn't just boiled down to a tense, bloodless living room standoff and now Derek's mute ire in his silent airy loft.

"What are you doing here," Derek asks, flat. "Why did you even bother."

"Why did I bother what? Helping you? Coming to you with the triquetra in the first place?"

"Trying to get him out of town," Derek says. Stiles has never heard him sound so mean. "When clearly you didn't--- you wanted him around."

"We were just fucking." Stiles hasn't ever said it out loud before, to anyone. Derek flinches back like he's been hit. "I thought you knew that," Stiles says, then, soft, surprised. "I assumed---that you assumed, that you knew. At least after tonight."

"I suspected," Derek says. "At the end. When you--- you were so clean, but he was all over your clothes, like he'd been touching you anyway. I thought maybe he tried something and you said no."

"Well that wasn't---how it happened. I said yes," Stiles says. "Every time." It hits him, somehow, saying it: the crazy enormity of what he's been doing, fucking an alpha werewolf and lying to everyone he knew about it, going over to Deucalion's house and rolling around in his bed, baring his neck, offering himself up. It felt reasonable and right, while he was doing it. He was so tired of waiting for danger to come and find him. It was easier, to let danger know he was coming, to invite it inside. He's been adrenalized for weeks now, running on a series of tightrope tentative shaky highs; now he feels it all of a sudden: he's weighed down by gravity, heavy in his bones. "I wanted him to," he says, palms up, helpless in the face of it, the destructive bent of his own desire.

"That's fucked up," Derek tells him shortly. "I mean, your choice, or whatever, but that's fucking cold, Stiles. To do that to---Scott."

"This wasn't about Scott," Stiles shoots back, the last dying embers of anger in him stirred and trembling. "It had nothing to do with Scott or any of you. I ran into him and we---he wanted to, he asked, I said yes, it was just---I didn't have to bring you the triquetra, I didn't have to come over here to hang out and help, I did it because I wanted to keep you safe. And if I wanted to---fuck someone, on the side, it's not like anyone else was offering, right? It was my decision to make and I made it and I'm not sorry." He doesn't know it's true until he says it, but it is: they didn't even need whatever limited intelligence he gathered from Deucalion, in the end. Derek got what he wanted and Stiles got what he needed and he's---so tired, too tired, to be expected to make good decisions all day every day.

"How are things with you and Scott?" Derek asks, gentle. "Does he--- know?"

"He doesn't know shit," Stiles says, breaking his personal rule about moping in public. "He's---busy. With Isaac. And wolf things. Which, you know, I get it. It's---"

"People tend to take their closest friendships for granted, sometimes" Derek says, and it would sound sage except that he kind of mumbles it against his chest, like he's embarrassed to have changed tacks so quickly, to be trying to give Stiles a pep talk about bromance, what the actual fuck. "I'm sure he doesn't know that you---"

"He doesn't, of course he doesn't."

"Because you've made sure he doesn't." Stiles nods. "Because you don't want him to have to worry about you." Another nod, this one slower and more serious. "But you're lonely."

Stiles looks down at his hands. Lonely. He has a dad and a best friend and a strange, loose-knit almost-pack, a grumpy werewolf research partner; until recently he had a hot older fuck buddy filling up his nights. *I don't have time to be lonely*, he thinks.

"Look," Derek says, scrubbing a hand through his hair, looking bashful, maybe even contrite. "I'm---what I said before, about you being---cold, that wasn't right, okay, I'm sorry. I know---I remember what it was like, to be eighteen." Derek was younger when he lost his family, when his home burned to the ground. Stiles wonders how he explained it to the people he dated, after. If he explained it. If he dated, even, really. "I just---you didn't think you had to, right?"

Stiles' laugh is mirthless. "No," he says. "It was, um, a purely selfish endeavor."

"Because it's---I know it's a lot. All of this. To be caught up in. And you didn't have to bring me the triquetra, or to stick around to help out. So. Um. Thank you. For all of it." Stiles feels something loosen in the back of his neck, lets out a long, shaky sigh.

"Yeah, you didn't explain how you managed it," he says, scrubbing the heel of one hand briefly across his eyes. "Which, nice job, by the way, only idiots explain their devious plans to the plan's victims."

"I'm not a dumb movie villain," Derek says, allowing himself a little bit of a smirk. "I know how to play the game. Anyway remember how we talked about pack symbols? The Hale triskelion, and the Alpha version?" Stiles nods. Derek pulls a piece of paper over from the stack left on the table, takes out a pen. He draws the Alpha's triskelion, the sharp corners of its angled piece. "Look," he says, softening the straight lines into curves, connecting them through the center. It's a rough shape, uneven, uncertain, but the idea is clear on the page. "The triquetra closes the triskele," Derek says. "It closes up the loop."

"It binds them," Stiles breathes.

"On a night when the moon is dark like this," Derek says. "It binds them from shifting. It will until I untie the knot." He produces a length of rope from his pocket, the triquetra in the round. It's hand braided, simple jute. Stiles would bet money that Deucalion's hair is somewhere in there, bound up. "I'll bury it in the forest tomorrow," he goes on. "It won't last forever, but as long as we stay in Beacon Hills it buys us a few years, at least."

"You figured this out on your own," Stiles says, jealous. He's supposed to be the idea man.

"You helped," Derek says. "You brought me the triquetra in the first place, you did your stupid Calc homework, you brought me the hair I needed, to make the bind specific." He shrugs and shuffles his feet before looking up, catching Stiles' gaze. "I would have been really fucked without you." It's the first time they've really looked at each other since that moment in Deucalion's living room.

"I'm sorry," Stiles says in a rush, not even sure what he's apologizing for. "If I made you think---that I was with them. That I was lying to you."

Derek looks surprised by it himself when he says, "You know, it didn't even occur to me, somehow. Even when I saw you, when I smelled you in the room. I knew, somehow, that you were going to be on my side."



In the morning Derek drives out to the Preserve. He picks Stiles up on the way; it's barely ten AM on Saturday and he's groggy, keeps getting hit by these huge jaw-cracking yawns that just cannot be attractive. He's insanely gratified when Derek not only pulls over at Starbucks but orders himself a cappuccino---Derek doesn't drink coffee, as a rule, or do anything that makes him seem companionably human---which he immediately ruins by dumping three packets of sugar into it. "You're gross," Stiles tells him cheerfully. Derek takes a long swallow of the coffee and grins at Stiles, showing all of his teeth.

The morning's mist is starting to burn off in the city but it gets cool and damp as they trek into the Preserve, Derek following some intuitive path as Stiles trips along behind him, trying to keep up. When they stop he has no idea where he is. He isn't even sure Derek knows where they are. Derek pulls a Mason jar out of his jacket pocket, the triquetra knot sealed inside it. He's also got a shovel, which he uses to dig a hole three or four feet deep, just wide enough for the jar. He slips it in without ceremony, lets Stiles cover it over again, mostly just to make himself feel useful.

"Shouldn't you plant some wolfsbane or something?" Stiles asks. "Mark the spot, keep them from snooping?"

"It wouldn't keep them away long," Derek says. "Ultimately it might attract them back here, or someone else. And it doesn't matter, anyway. This isn't meant to be permanent. The knot will hold until it doesn't. And not all of us will stay in Beacon Hills forever."

"So you're just going to---leave it? Walk away?"

"It's done its work," Derek says. "Deucalion texted me from Sonoma this morning. They're headed south to see what they can do in San Francisco."

"So we'll just---make up the rest as we go along," Stiles says.

"That's as much plan as I've got, anyway," Derek tells him.

"Seems to be working out so far." They stand together and look down at the

little patch of freshly turned earth they've created, a light, loose scar against the darkly packed ground that surrounds it. "So I guess you're really--- staying," Stiles says, and he's surprised that he's surprised by it, because Derek's been fighting to make Beacon Hills home ever since he started to assemble his pack. He's just always done from the margins, refusing to commit to anything until he was sure it was safe, leaving himself escape routes. Now he's going to be safest, here. Stiles wonders if this means he'll start buying actual furniture for the loft.

"I guess so," Derek says. "Now I just have to get my pack in order, which is going to be---I think I'd rather go back to squaring off against Deucalion, honestly."

"They might come around," Stiles says. "I think it will be different, when things are calm, when it's peaceful, when you guys can talk."

"I'm sorry about what I said to Deucalion," Derek says, almost deceptively casual. "About you not---belonging. It seemed like the safest thing."

"I mean, I'm not," Stiles says.

"No," Derek says. "No, no, I didn't think---"

"I'm human," Stiles says, instead of letting Derek finish whatever awful, self-deprecating sentence he's about to form, and because he's been thinking about this a lot, lately. "I'm not really built for that kind of thing, you know? Doesn't mean we aren't---friends." The flush on Derek's cheeks and at the tips of his ears makes Stiles feel warm all over, loose and pleased. He can't help going on, teasing Derek just a little. "Does it bother you," he goes on. "That none of us smell like you? I feel like real wolves scent mark their territory---"

"*By peeing on it*," Derek says, in a gloriously familiar, aggrieved tone. "I'm not an animal, Stiles, I don't know why you think everything you read on the internet---"

"But you can smell it, right," Stiles presses on. "Who I've been hanging out

with, what I've been up to. I mean you said--- Deucalion---and I know Scott can tell what I've been doing. Sometimes, uh, too well."

"Sure," Derek says. "But I don't, um. You're not territory."

"I know that," Stiles says, rolling his eyes. He's so busy doing it that he almost misses the next thing Derek says, which is a low mutter, meant to get lost.

"It's nice, though."

"Nice?" Stiles says, gleeful, sharp.

"Uh."

"When I smell like you?"

"When you smell familiar," Derek snaps. "When I know---what it means." Stiles hadn't ever thought about that way, the long unknown hours of his life, what it meant when he blew into Derek's apartment covered over by evidence of his life outside of it. If Derek missed the marks of Deucalion just because there was so much else in the way.

"You can ask," Stiles says, soft. "If there's something---specific. Scott does." He looks at Derek, casual in the morning light in a hoodie and jeans and a green army jacket, thick boots for tramping through the Preserve's uneven ground. He's still sleepy-looking, around the eyes, and he's got two day stubble shadowing the sharp hollows of his cheeks. He seemed enormous to Stiles, when he first showed up, broad and terrifying, thick muscles and an angry scowl; now he knows that Derek doesn't so much take up space as inhabit it, empty air always following him around. "You can touch me," he goes on. "If---if you want."

Derek looks up at him. He looks lost. "You don't have to," he says. "I'm not---" he doesn't say Deucalion's name, and for a minute Stiles is grateful but then it hangs heavy between them, coloring the air, too much for the bright light of morning.

"I know you're not," Stiles says. "This has nothing to do with him."

"I'm not---" Derek says again. "I don't want anyone to get confused."

"Are you confused?"

"*No.*"

"I don't think I'm confused," Stiles says, stepping in close enough to make his intentions clear. "And I'm not---that was just---eighteen, remember? It was the off hours. It was just a thing I did to kill some time."

"And this is---"

"I don't know," Stiles says, willing Derek to come in closer, to close the gap between them. "But I want to find out."

"Research," Derek says, smirking.

"Something like that," Stiles agrees.

They kiss long and slow and sweet, Derek's hands coming up to clutch at Stiles' hair, his waist, tilting his head back to mouth along his jaw, his neck, not biting just---breathing, gentle and wet and mind-bendingly intense.

"There," Derek murmurs, absurdly self-satisfied.

"Just that?" Stiles asks. Derek is flushed and mussed, bright-eyed, lively and lovely under his hands. Stiles reaches up to brush his fingertips against his own swollen mouth, something tightening low in his belly at the way Derek breathes in at the sight of him.

"Not nearly," Derek says, kissing him again. Eventually he pulls away, keeps his hands on Stiles' warm skin. "Come on, let's get back to the car before the scent trail goes cold." So they lope off together, into the morning. After a little while Derek must notice the harshness creeping in to Stiles' breath, and he slows down so that Stiles can keep up. Stiles reaches out to take his hand. They keep pace together, the rest of the way.

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